Is That E-mail Fact or Fiction?

If you have an e-mail account, you are familiar with chain letters. They are sent by strangers or well-intentioned friends or family members. For security purposes, delete those sent to your address at work. At home you'll want to verify information before following any instructions or passing the message along. Chain letters can mask viruses or other malicious activity. Even those that seem harmless may have negative effects because they consume bandwidth during transmission and space within the recipient's inbox. Often you are spreading hype and unnecessary fear and paranoia. There are two types of chain letters:

Hoaxes - trick or defraud users. A hoax can be malicious, instructing users to delete a file necessary to the operating system claiming it is a virus. It can also be a scam that convinces users to send money or personal information. Phishing attacks fall into this category.

Urban legends - are designed to "warn" users of a threat or "notify" them of important information. Common forms are e-mails that promise users monetary rewards for forwarding the message or suggest that they are signing something that will be submitted to a particular group. Urban legends usually have no negative effect aside from wasting bandwidth and time.

A hoax or urban legend e-mail has these characteristics:
- It suggests tragic consequences for not performing some action.
- It promises money or gift certificates for performing some action.
- It offers instructions or attachments claiming to protect you from a virus undetected by anti-virus software.
- It claims it is not a hoax.
- It urges you to forward the message.
- It has been forwarded multiple times.

These are web sites that provide hoax information:
- http://www.symantec.com/avcenter/hoax.html
- http://vil.mcafee.com/hoax.asp

June 2007

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